

A Cry of Terror in the Dark

Spiro Markou

A Cry of Terror in the Dark – Spiro Markou

A Cry of Terror in the Dark
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One

In his dressing-room, stretched out on the sofa beside his dressing-table, costumed for his role, Richard should not be letting his mind wander from the performance, but should be, toward the moment of curtain-up, concentrating on it, not to mention simultaneously mustering up all the force he can in his, though nearly fifty years old, fairly slim and toned body. He prides himself on his power of concentration, his power of concentrating body and soul on the performance—but today is, when he thinks about it, his child Maggie's birthday. The party with her playmates and his wife Ellen and her acquaintances, planned for early afternoon, must have ended some hours ago: Maggie's seventh birthday and he was not there.

But Maggie will not much care. For when he is absent, she is, Ellen tells him, not much concerned, though she now and then asks about him, asks where her Papa is, in what strange country and what he is doing, what funny clothes wearing and funny faces making. Mostly childish questions and curiosities, but from now on, being older, a full seven years old as of today, it might be different with her; being a full seven years old, she might care to a greater degree and more essentially about his absence, might feel to a greater degree and more essentially his neglect, which he realizes his conduct toward her is from any viewpoint but his own.

What difference does it make that he was not there for her birthday party? Why should he have to be there on the exact day of her birthday? In any case, he spent a few days with her, of his most precious days, only a while back.

When was it exactly that Richard last saw Maggie? It must have been sometime in early June, a short time before they began the summer

performances here at the outdoor New Syracuse Theater. He last saw her already over seven weeks ago?

Trying always to see her, when at all possible, at least once every month or so—earlier in his career, before It appeared some five years ago, having had his man Carl schedule in his then more frequent visits to her—Richard should have found time to go to The Coast and see Maggie even before today, her birthday. But he, somehow or other, did not, could not, would not, no, would not, with so short of a time remaining—a time remaining and only remaining, of nearly the nothing there is of it, to achieve what he wants to achieve, needs to achieve, must achieve: a cry of terror in the dark.

In any case, over the phone a few days ago, he told Maggie that he might not be able to come on her birthday, because of the night's performance. Then last night after the performance—a resounding success, he must admit, having heard several shouts of, what he is in fact averse to hearing, "Richard the Great!"—there was that woman who, somehow, circumventing the cordon he has placed about himself, particularly at the theater, found her way into his dressing-room and congratulated him on his, he must agree, wonderful performance. Later, he went with her to her hotel room and spent the night with her, and slept in till nearly eleven o'clock this morning, too late to catch a flight to The Coast, take a taxi to the house, see Maggie, if only for a few hours, and return here in time for tonight's performance—tonight's performance a short time away and therefore a short time to think of nothing else.

Last night, both at the theater and, afterward, with the woman in her hotel room, Richard did not think about Maggie, much less her birthday today. But she must have at least passed through his mind? Or, as Ellen once called him, one day soon after It appeared and confronted him, challenged him in his inmost very heart, is he a veritable Richard the Terrible?

He did not really enjoy himself with the woman—what was her name?—as much as he wished and thought that he would because of, after her initial meaningless exclamations, her fairly intelligent and positive comments on his performance *It was extraordinarily funny because it was extraordinarily true—particularly with your last monologue. I laughed so much it nearly frightened me.* He thought that, later in bed in her hotel room, she might go further, that she had been moved much more and was only waiting to relate the great experience to him, the very cause of it. But he found that she had not passed beyond being by him merely, and merely nearly, frightened and frightened merely because of the exuberance of her laughter. Laughter in the dark of the audience, however exuberant, is very far from what he desires most, his deepest, inmost need—the desire of merciless It in his inmost very heart: a cry of terror in the dark.

Richard in fact lives exclusively for It, completely for It, body and soul for It: body and soul is willing to sacrifice everything to It.

He has already to a great degree sacrificed everything to It, sacrificed to It, what was his everything before It appeared, his wife and child, the love of the former and the whole very existence of the latter, and sacrificed to It the love and fidelity due to the former, his wife Ellen, and the love and care and simple attention due to the latter, his child Maggie.

But with Maggie at least, being only a child, there is still time to set things right, still time to give her what is due her, what she deserves simply by being a child. The next couple years are her crucial years and therefore he should begin as soon as possible—immediately upon, if it ever comes to pass: a cry of terror in the dark.

Ellen now and then tells him that he lives for himself and only for himself, exclusively for himself, completely for himself: lives as if he were the most significant creature in the whole universe *You care, Richard, for Maggie? But you can't live with her always? Unable to extract the smile and laughter always? But only within the plot of the*

play, and only on stage beneath the lights? Yes, only with the practiced scene, and only before an audience in the dark?

Richard, you never genuinely see Maggie, but only her reaction to you. In fact you only look at her to see her reaction to you, you and your antics. And good for her she isn't so impressed. Don't you notice how she doesn't find you so impressive? And only wait till she gets older.

Does she laugh so very much? And aren't her smiles for you rare enough? Don't you notice? Aren't you, the consummate actor, Richard the Great himself, aware of the reactions of your audience?

Yes Richard, Maggie herself wants to show you herself. Her doll's broken leg. The hole in the garden she made for the man from China to come out of. The hair-cut she gave Pussy. But no, she must be forced to watch your performance—sorry dear, Maggie loves you and often asks why her Papa cannot be with her.

You love her? Take her then. But she isn't part of some short simple one-act play to realize your egotistical needs with and then curtain down, lights out, theater emptied and door closed, locked and bolted till the next performance.

Stretched out on the sofa beside his dressing-table, costumed for his role, Richard should not be, no, should not be letting his mind wander from the performance—but Ellen does not understand that his need is not simply for praise nor even, what he has not too seldom found himself the center of, a huge very bedlam of laughter and applause, does not understand that, though accepting such recognition of his talent, and endeavoring to the best of his ability to feel some semblance of satisfaction in it, he is not one needing daily doses of such ordinary remedies, having had his fill of suchlike years ago. His need, his merciless need is for what he has never received by his revelations of truths in comedy: a cry of terror in the dark.

If he could only once hear a cry of terror in the dark, or even, perhaps, it might be enough, simply know that he created it, Richard would be

done, would know that his genius for comedy was realized to the utmost, or, rather, was realized beyond the utmost by his having transfigured comedy, from one moment to the next, into the highest tragedy.

Anyway, whether his greatest inmost dream will be realized tonight or not, Richard will take the first flight to The Coast tomorrow and see Maggie for a few hours, then return here for tomorrow night's performance—again to endeavor, if not successful tonight, to realize his greatest inmost dream. Tomorrow, in addition to skipping rehearsal, not at all material, he will even, if he must, give up his afternoon rest. But he will, probably, not need to; he will, somehow or other, manage not to miss it. And he must not miss his afternoon rest. For he must not risk tomorrow night's performance, must not risk being tired and rundown and therefore unable to perform to the utmost of his genius. Then afterward, after he does so or nearly, he will be more or less fine for the remainder of the night and more or less through the morning of the next day—with its night's performance with all its exacting demands on his powers.

And he will have to keep it up for some days more. How many days exactly? Including tonight's, Monday's, there are six more performances before they break for three days, beginning Sunday. Yes, for six more performances Richard must maintain his quality and intensity—and must, must create out of himself with his words, gestures and actions, on stage beneath the lights, the impossible in the dark of the audience: a cry of terror.

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, three days he will spend with Maggie. But he wants to see her tomorrow. For he wanted to today on her birthday and one day later will not make much difference. There will even be some cake left over. Also she will want to show him her gifts and, as always, things she has found, things seen and things made, of course means of showing herself. And he wants very much for Maggie to show herself to him *Because, Richard, as with the mirrors of your fellow*

performers, you can play off her? Play off what you see in your child's face? Play off her gestures? Play off her words, indeed her lines? You only look at her and listen to her, only notice her, as with all the other, to you, merely mechanical placards on stage, to be able to play your own role to perfection.

But is it not better to spend nearly three full days with Maggie than just a few hours tomorrow? Or—no, to have done with what he should do or should not do, he will be on the early morning flight to The Coast tomorrow. Richard hears his man Carl's knock at his dressing-room door. 'Please Carl, come in' he calls out, costumed, stretched out on the sofa beside his dressing-table.

The door opens and Carl leans in. 'Sir, fifteen minutes to curtain' he informs him.

'Be back here in ten minutes' responds Richard with the usual instruction and immediately forgets everything beyond the performance and the desire of merciless It in his inmost very heart: a cry of terror in the dark.

*

'Richard my man, great show!'

'Dear, you were tops!'

'Mister Burlington, I haven't seen you so...!'

Richard fairly flees down the thronged and noisy corridor to his dressing-room door, opens it, enters and slams it shut on all the exasperating nonsense. He goes directly to his dressing-table, sits in the chair in front of the mirror and begins to remove his makeup. He does not want to dawdle, unwinding, relaxing, as sometimes, particularly after a fine performance; he wants only to remove his makeup, change out of his costume into his clothes, leave here and get back to his hotel and suite and directly into bed. Or, perhaps, first, before bed, he will have a quick drink—but no, definitely, not in the hotel bar, where most

of his colleagues will be spending the night well into the wee hours of the morning. Or, perhaps, first he will have a bite to eat, then a drink and then into bed.

The chief thing is to get to sleep relatively early, to be able to wake up in time for the early morning flight to The Coast tomorrow. Is it not in fact awfully early? Richard gets up, goes to the door and puts his ear to it; quiet; Carl has, as usual, done his job, cleared quickly the corridor outside his dressing-room. He opens the door and sees, as he expected, Carl sitting in a chair against the wall opposite, fairly keeping guard. 'Please Carl, find out the time of the early morning flight tomorrow' he tells him.

'Yes Mister Burlington, right away' replies Carl, then gets up from the chair and goes down the corridor.

Richard closes the door, goes back to his dressing-table, sits again in the chair in front of the mirror and resumes to remove his makeup. He should have also told Carl to book the flight. No matter, he will as soon as he returns with the time. He hears a hesitant knock at the door; not Carl's knock. Who could it be now? A still more hesitant, more polite knock; the person behind the door wishes not to intrude—but, for all that, is trying to intrude. If he sits here very quietly, without a peep, he or she, whoever he or she is, will go away.

'Richard, may I come in?' inquires a woman behind the door. 'It's Janice.'

Janice? But of course, the woman from last night. 'Janice my dear, do come in' calls out Richard with cosmopolitan politeness.

The door opens and Janice steps into his dressing-room. 'I don't want to bother you' she says in a rush, 'but just wanted to tell you how much you—what a performance!' He gets up from the chair at his dressing-table. She closes the door behind her, walks up to him and kisses him on the cheek. 'Will you be celebrating?'

'I was planning only...'

'After bringing the house down!'

‘No, I beg you’ he fairly pleads. ‘Please Janice, do sit down.’ She takes a seat on the sofa and places her purse on the low table in front of it. He seats himself beside her.

‘Richard, I only wanted to tell you’ she goes on with her praise ‘how much you moved me.’

Richard hears Carl’s knock, against his wish at the moment. ‘What is it?’ he calls out somewhat gruffly, indeed vexed at the interruption.

The door opens and Carl leans in. ‘Sir, the early morning flight tomorrow is at five-thirty, with a number of seats available’ he informs Richard. ‘Do you want me to book?’

‘No, not just yet’ answers Richard, feeling, beside him, the woman’s enthusiasm for his performance.

‘But Mister Burlington, what about...’ alludes Carl, he understands, to Maggie’s birthday today.

Ignoring the allusion to his own personal concern, Richard turns to Janice beside him; full-bodied and warmth-exuding, exactly as Ellen used to be before she thinned and chilled to him; more stimulating, on her warm and full-featured face, the residual traces of her great laughter, her great acknowledgement, the reflection of his great achievement: the reflection of his very greatness. He turns back to Carl, to his vexation, still standing in the doorway. ‘I’ll let you know’ he dismisses him with an abrupt tone. Carl withdraws and closes the door. Richard stands up from beside Janice on the sofa. ‘Only allow me some time to get ready, Janice my dear’ he tells her with cosmopolitan politeness, then steps to his dressing-table and sits once again in the chair in front of the mirror.

‘Of course Richard my dear’ replies Janice as she situates herself more comfortably on the sofa. ‘There’s no hurry at all—we have the whole night before us.

*

Richard wakes up beside Janice in bed; he is in her hotel room. Unfortunately, last night, he did not, from New Syracuse Theater, go directly to his own hotel and suite and into bed, to wake up in time to catch the early morning flight at five-thirty—in fact did not even have Carl book. He looks at the clock on the night-stand and, beside it, is confronted with the hotel calendar; he makes out in the dark Tuesday, the twenty-sixth of July, a day after the twenty-fifth: a day after Maggie's birthday. It is utterly inexcusable that he forgot yesterday to call and wish her "Happy Birthday"—utterly, utterly inexcusable. Particularly inasmuch as Carl reminded him first thing, first thing when he, from Janice's hotel, got back to his own hotel and suite yesterday morning, at about the same time it must be now. He looks again at the clock on the night-stand; some minutes before eleven and, beside it, is confronted with the hotel calendar; the hotel calendar thrusts before him yesterday, Monday, the twenty-fifth of July: Maggie's birthday.

No, he did not even call, though indeed Carl reminded him yesterday morning first thing and, though less explicitly, several more times later during the day. But when he woke up yesterday morning and found himself in bed with Janice in her hotel room, he began to fret about the night's performance, as usual when deviating at all from his normally extremely disciplined program, being so particularly the last five years or so, the time of the dominion of merciless It. Therefore, because of which, when he got back to his own hotel and suite, he, fairly frantic, immediately got the script from the bureau drawer and began to read for his role, becoming completely absorbed in it after only a minute or two.

Unfortunately, there is nothing he can do about it now; unfortunately, unlike during rehearsal, he cannot reverse things to any point he wishes and go over them again, filling in omissions and ironing out mistakes. Therefore he can now only ring and apologize, offering some excuse, such as that he did phone, but could not get through.

But Ellen will not be taken in and not let it pass so easily *Too busy with your play-world? No time for reality? No time for real life? No*

time for real human beings? No time for your very own child and her real needs? Richard, you must try to realize Maggie isn't some submissive supporting actress playing a role only for your, the great man's, Richard the Great's benefit.

Richard looks at the woman Janice sleeping beside him in bed; though, as last night, full-bodied and warmth-exuding, now oblivious of him and nonexistent her great admiration of last night. He could begin to strangle her in bed here in the dark of her hotel room. Then she would wake up and become conscious of him and afraid of him, and admire him for his power over her, his power to extract fear from her. Or, more likely, and hopefully, what he greatly desires, the reason why he feels a cold lucid lust to strangle the woman here in the dark: she would wake up with a cry of terror. He would make sure that his hands around her throat were exactly right to allow her, in her turn, to perform properly in the dark, to perform a cry of terror in the dark with her mouth gaping wide, her eyes popping out of her head and her hands waving hilariously in the air trying futilely to escape.

The last several years, when in bed with a woman and seeing her sleeping, oblivious of him, and with the dark of her hotel room suggesting to him the dark of the audience at the theater, Richard thinks the same sort of things often, catches himself with the same sort of thoughts in mind often, he must admit, much too often.

But even if he were to strangle some woman in the dark of her hotel room, it would not really be what he desires; for some reason he cannot understand, though knowing that it stems from It, indeed inexplicable It, he does not want a cry of terror in the dark to occur through a grim event, but a comedic truth. It is the reason why he does not want to endeavor in tragedies to create out of himself a cry of terror in the dark. Also in tragedies, as part of the very script of most of them, any cry of terror would be false, would be not true reality experienced by a person in the audience in the dark, but merely paper play-acting by some fellow actor, some fellow actor indeed following the script on the stage

beneath the lights. In fact it is one of the most important things, which again he does not understand, that his fellow actor's cry of terror would be not in the audience and the dark, but on the stage and beneath the lights, at times the extremely glaring lights.

Richard puts on his clothes and leaves Janice's hotel room.

*

In the lobby of his hotel, Richard steps up to the front-desk. 'Good-day Pierre' he greets the receptionist.

'Good-day Mister Burlington' returns Pierre. 'I was requested by your man to notify him as soon as you arrived.'

'Please do. And ask him to come to my suite in twenty minutes or so.'

'Yes sir' and hands Richard the key to his suite.

'Thank you.' Suddenly it comes to him that he has not had anything to eat since before his afternoon rest yesterday. 'Pierre, if anything is left over from breakfast please send up some of it.'

'At your service Mister Burlington.'

Richard leaves the front-desk, goes into one of the elevators and presses the button for the top floor. Undoubtedly, Ellen phoned, to take him to task for not phoning himself yesterday to wish Maggie "Happy Birthday." He will just tell her the truth, that yesterday, at various times, he was about to remember and, at other times, did remember, but, somehow or other, before he knew it, the time of his afternoon rest arrived. And when he woke up, he began, as usual, to concentrate on the night's performance and his role, forgetting everything extraneous.

Ellen might stab him with "Richard the Terrible," as that one time which hurt him so much. It hurt him of course for being true. And, worse yet, it has become more and more true with the passing of time. Soon she will with good reason, with the undeniable truth behind her, only call him "Richard the Terrible."

The elevator reaches the top floor and the door opens. Richard steps out of it into the foyer and goes to his suite door, unlocks it, enters and immediately begins to undress for his morning shower. Then there is the much more important matter of wasting his time with explanations. Therefore he will just admit that, though meaning to throughout the day, he simply did not get around to ringing, or, better yet, only say that he forgot without adding details, without adding hows and whys and wheres, and take whatever Ellen darts at him, as not too seldom when he, according to her criteria, fails to fulfill his duty as a father *Too busy? No time to remember it was Maggie's first day ever of school?*

Too busy? No time to remember her school's Christmas play, pretending she was you and telling everyone to call her "Richard Burlington?"

Too busy? No time, Richard, to remember your child? What? Your time is passing? You haven't done what you want to do? But Richard dear, what about Maggie? Will she ever be a child again? Will you ever know her a child again? Will she ever want to show you her child things again? Will she ever want to show you herself a child again?

Don't you care at all about Maggie? Do you care only about yourself?

And if Ellen only knew the whole truth of the matter, knew about It, what censure, at the least, would she heap upon him. To any substantial extent and explicitly Richard has never desired to explain It to Ellen, being his deepest, inmost secret. In fact he began only recently to try to explain to himself It, to articulate to himself what It is which has been tormenting him for some five years now. What he knows for sure is that It was the secret of the tremendous jump of his talent of five years ago or so: the time he became none other than Richard the Great—at least in the eyes of some of the more foolish, but well-meaning, critics and members of the public.

Undressed, Richard goes into the bathroom and stops at a distance in front of the mirror; fairly trim and taut, not so bad for a nearly fifty year

old man. He steps into the tub and turns on the shower. It must be nearly noon already, even later than usual for his morning shower, having slept in with that woman Janice—last night, wonderfully full-bodied and warmth-exuding and, much more importantly, so very filled with her great admiration, yes, her great outright adoration of him and his, he must admit, great performance.

*

In his suite, just finished with his later than usual morning shower, being some time past noon, in his bathrobe sitting at a table spread with his late breakfast, Richard takes his first bite of toast. He hears Carl's knock at the door. 'Carl, I'm up and going' he calls out cheerily and places the toast on a plate. Carl comes in and steps up to him at the table. Richard notices a strained expression of some kind on Carl's face, as if he were upset about something. Probably, he had another small spat with his girl Marianne. As he has suggested to him on several occasions, and as he and Ellen themselves did all those years ago, they should simply marry and have done with it, without calculating and worrying about the details and practicalities, whether financial—he and Ellen themselves had to borrow for their marriage license—or any other.

'Good day sir' says Carl, very much absorbed in something, the strained expression on his face. He looks away from Richard and begins to make a show of arranging things in the area of the table, shifting about, indeed, apparently, without purpose, discarded tie, jacket and shirt, magazines, chairs and whatnot.

Carl is, he sees, more upset than he thought. It cannot be a serious quarrel with Marianne, being impossible even to imagine them having one. Therefore, in all likelihood, it concerns himself: Ellen of course. She must have phoned, wanting to take him to task for not phoning himself yesterday to wish Maggie "Happy Birthday." Though, beyond a doubt, she said not a word about it to him, Carl understood that

something was up by the tone of voice she must have used, at the least, extremely impatient at being unable to reach him.

Richard must grant that Ellen never gives vent to her condemnation of him to others, much less his own man. Also, more importantly, particularly now with her getting older, indeed as of yesterday a full seven years old, and more able to understand things, she never demeans him, he is positive, in the eyes of Maggie. In fact she, he has gathered from Maggie herself, from comments of hers which in an adult would be considered social slips, even makes excuses for him to her, that he is a very busy man, a great man, with many responsibilities, many people depending on him and so forth. Now, he knows, with her a full seven years old, it will simply not do, not be sufficient; now, he knows, needing more, she might ask, at least herself, if only indistinctly, what about herself, herself depending on him, herself needing him?

Richard will from now on make a real attempt to come to terms with Maggie. But it would be easier if he were not so busy; it would be easier if there were more time: it would be easier if there were not it. ‘Hey there my good fellow’ he gains Carl’s attention. Carl leaves off with the pretence of arranging things and steps up to Richard at the table spread with his late breakfast. ‘Pierre at the front-desk told me he was to inform you when I arrived. Is there anything?’

‘Sir, Madame Burlington rang-rang to—...’ attempts Carl unsuccessfully to impart something.

‘Well, what did she say?’ asks Richard, somewhat gruffed at having to deal with Ellen. Yes, though it will, at the least, inconvenience him, he will have to phone her himself, to try, somehow or other, to make amends for his omissions on Maggie’s birthday yesterday—but only after he has his breakfast.

‘Sir’ answers Carl with extreme difficulty, ‘there’s been—a terrible accident.’

Richard hesitates to process “a terrible accident”—then suddenly flees as fast as he can from “a terrible accident,” tries frantically to hide from “a terrible accident.” ‘Have you—’ he chokes out ‘—booked—the flight?’

‘Yes sir’ answers Carl as steadily as he can, trying to give a good front, seeing Richard on the verge of losing control of himself. ‘The flight departs in just over an hour from now, at one-forty-five, the earliest, other than the five-thirty morning flight’ and moves off and begins to get things ready in earnest.

Trying to keep himself under control, Richard gets up from the table, removes his bathrobe and begins to dress. Where was he when he should have been on the five-thirty morning flight? With a woman? Why with a woman sleeping oblivious of him begin to strangle her in the dark she would wake up become conscious of him afraid of him admire him for his power over her the five-thirty morning flight Maggie’s birthday yesterday Monday the twenty-fifth of July a full seven years old make sure that his hands around her throat were exactly right to allow her in her turn to perform properly in the dark *Sir, there’s been—a terrible accident* wanted to see her on her birthday one day later will not make much difference there will even be some cake left over also she will want to show him her gifts *Sir, there’s been—a terrible accident* to perform a cry of terror in the dark with her mouth gaping wide her eyes popping out of her head her hands waving hilariously in the air trying futilely to escape *Sir, there’s been—a terrible accident* one day later will not make much difference.

Two

Just back from watching Maggie being washed and dressed for the vigil, in the study—during the earlier years, when a regular inhabitant of the house, where he worked in preparation for his roles—sitting in an armchair fairly stunned, Richard searches for something to say, something to think, something to feel other than—no. Fighting his both inner and outer inertia, he looks up at Ellen sitting in an armchair across from him; already wearing a plain black dress; though only thirty-six years old, with devastation in her greenish eyes and across her features, and her bright-red hair gathered up in a tight bun, appearing this moment an old woman. ‘Ellen’ he manages with suppressed emotion.

‘Richard, our little darling—...’ she says with a stifled sob.

‘Dear—Ellen, what—...’ he attempts unsuccessfully to ask her to tell him exactly what happened.

Some time passes, both of them sitting in the armchairs across from one another quite devastated, grievous pain on both of their faces, but trying to gain some possession of themselves.

‘She was playing on the veranda’ begins Ellen very quietly, not wanting, he feels, to wake up Maggie, though, he knows, logically impossible, she being too far away to hear, on the ground floor, on the other side of the house, in the dark of the parlor. ‘It seems she heard a car coming from up the road and ran out—the driver found Arthur working in the garden. Arthur immediately called Doctor Sylvester.

‘When he arrived and saw—there was nothing he could do.

‘He said it would be at best extremely precarious to transport her to a hospital in the capital. In any event—...’

Sitting in the armchair across from her, with her grievously wounded greenish eyes on him, drilling through him into the indefensible guilt in his inmost very heart, Richard swallows a sob.

‘But Doctor Sylvester’ continues Ellen with a deep breath ‘did make an effort to revive her’ now, to Richard, almost as if she were shouting, shouting directly at him, shouting directly at him because of his indefensible guilt. ‘He gave her an injection of some kind.’

‘Maggie was unconscious and barely breathing even before he arrived—from the moment of the accident.’

Neither she nor he should speak at all. No, they do not want to wake up Maggie, though, he knows, logically impossible, she being too far away to hear, on the ground floor, on the other side of the house, in the dark of the parlor—in the dark of the parlor? But in the dark of the parlor, when he entered, Richard found only—no.

‘An hour or so later, at about ten o’clock’ finishes Ellen, ‘I tried to reach you at your hotel’ and gets up abruptly from the armchair across from him and goes to a window of the study, with a view of the garden below in the evening twilight.

Where was Richard at ten o’clock this morning, when he should have been here? Rather, he should have been here even earlier, before Maggie began to play on the veranda and would have been in his and Ellen’s room, as always on his visits, fussing with him, trying to wake him up from his actor’s proverbial sleeping in, and therefore would have never...

For that matter, Richard should have been here yesterday, the twenty-fifth of July, this year a Monday, Maggie’s birthday, well in advance of and therefore averting *Sir, there’s been—a terrible accident* well in advance of and therefore averting *Sir, there’s been—a terrible accident* well in advance of and therefore averting *Sir, there’s been—a terrible accident* at ten o’clock this morning sleeping oblivious of him begin to strangle her in the dark she would wake up become conscious of him afraid of him admire him for his power over her the five-thirty morning

flight Maggie's birthday yesterday a full seven years old make sure that his hands around her throat were exactly right to allow her in her turn to perform properly in the dark *Maggie loves you and often asks why her Papa cannot be with her* wanted to see her on her birthday one day later will not make much difference there will even be some cake left over also she will want to show him her gifts *Maggie loves you and often asks why her Papa cannot be with her* to perform a cry of terror in the dark with her mouth gaping wide her eyes popping out of her head her hands waving hilariously in the air trying futilely to escape *Maggie loves you and often asks why her Papa cannot be with her* one day later will not make much difference.

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The white dress is pretty she might have worn it for her birthday party yesterday he will ask to see the photographs to remember her birthday dress it is dark here in the parlor why is it so dark? why is the stage so dark? must ask one of the stage-hands to turn on the lights why is it so quiet in the dark? why is there no laughter in the dark? *Maggie my little darling* somebody is whispering in the dark right in the middle of the play! why do they not shut up and laugh?! *you know, Mama has told you Papa plays only comedies. And this isn't funny—don't expect Papa to play along* somebody is whispering in the dark right in the middle of the play! why do they not shut up and laugh?! *No, Papa refuses to laugh* the white dress is pretty in the light of the candles the pretty birthday dress perhaps if he can get her to laugh even to smile but he cannot remember his lines where is the script? he cannot remember his role where is the script? where is that Carl? he cannot remember the play where is the stage? where are the lights? where is the audience? have the lights gone out on the audience already? are they in the dark? have the lights gone out on the play already? the curtain fallen? silence in the dark no laughter no smile in the dark the pretty white dress

lighted by the seven candles the pretty white dress for the birthday girl a full seven years old a full seven years old a full seven years old...

‘Richard dear, would you like for me to bring you something?’ offers Ellen with deep consideration, standing before him sitting hunched up in an armchair in the study. ‘Maybe some tea? A bite to eat?’

Tea? A bite to eat? What does Ellen mean? For he must get back to Maggie alone in the dark of the parlor—but the dark? Why is the parlor dark? But, whatever the reason, there are the seven candles—the seven candles! Richard gets up abruptly from the armchair and as he makes to move away suddenly feels that he should say something to Ellen, standing there looking, to put it mildly, lost and frightened. But what can he say to her, say to her to help her? For she and he both are beyond any help.

‘Please Richard, wait a moment’ she forestalls him, seeing that he wants to leave. He sits with reluctance in the armchair again. She takes a seat in the armchair across from him.

‘Yes?’ he forces himself to listen to her, wishing only to get back to Maggie alone in the dark of the parlor.

‘Won’t you agree to delay the funeral one day?’ she goes directly to the point. ‘A short while ago the workers’ spokesman announced the transportation strike will continue tomorrow.’ Richard sighs an inner sigh of relief that he made it to The Coast and here to the house before the unannounced countrywide transportation strike in the early hours of the afternoon. ‘Let’s wait and see’ she fairly insists. ‘Relent only this one time.

‘I know, you’re perfectly right, to think of her alone...

‘But my parents, Richard dear, her grandparents, if they don’t see her again—’

‘—But Ellen, think about it’ he interrupts her in his wish only to get back to Maggie alone in the dark of the parlor, ‘as you just said, her, our little darling Maggie alone—’ and rises from the armchair ‘—with neither one of us to watch over her’ and, without another word, leaves the study

and goes down the hallway toward the staircase leading to the ground floor.

It must be around midnight. But midnight and still awake? He should be in bed sleeping to be fresh for tomorrow night's performance and he is more tired than he usually would be because he missed his afternoon rest he was he was he was where was he? was he even there? the white dress is pretty she might have worn it for her birthday yesterday he will ask to see the photographs to remember her birthday dress it is dark here in the parlor why is it so dark? why is the stage so dark? must ask one of the stage-hands to turn on the lights why is it so quiet in the dark? why is there no laughter in the dark? no laughter no smile in the dark he cannot even extract the minutest smile from her in the dark he must be getting old he is washed up at fifty not even a smile in the dark the dark? why is Maggie alone in the dark?

Richard enters the parlor, without turning on any lights, and goes to Maggie in a coffin, wearing a white dress, surrounded by seven candles. He bends over close to her. 'Maggie my little darling, Mama has told you Papa plays only comedies' he whispers. 'This play isn't funny. No, Papa refuses to laugh. You might as well stop the play-acting.

'Do you hear? Papa says stop the play-acting—stop pretending to be Papa.

'Papa, not you my little darling, is the actor Richard Burlington' and suddenly bursts into a momentary fit of hysterical laughter, then jerks erect and looks frantically around the dark of the parlor. Laughter? Who was that laughing in the dark?

He bends over close to Maggie in the coffin, wearing the white dress, surrounded by the seven candles. 'Richard Burlington' he whispers, 'stop the play-acting now, this very minute.

'Can't you hear, Richard Burlington?

'Richard Burlington, you stop, stop this very minute!

'Or else, or else—I'll walk out right in the middle of the play! Then you'll all see how things go without me—Richard the Great himself!'

and suddenly bursts into a momentary fit of hysterical laughter, then jerks erect and looks frantically around the dark of the parlor. Laughter? Who was that laughing in the dark?

He bends over close to Maggie in the coffin, wearing the white dress, surrounded by the seven candles. ‘I refuse, refuse’ he whispers ‘to act a cry of terror in the dark.

‘It’s not my part but the audience’s. And besides that, this isn’t even comedy—isn’t even funny.

‘Please Maggie my little darling, this isn’t funny in the least.

‘Please Papa loves—’ and suddenly bursts into a momentary fit of hysterical laughter, then jerks erect and looks frantically around the dark of the parlor. Laughter? Who was that laughing in the dark?

He bends over close to Maggie in the coffin, wearing the white dress, surrounded by the seven candles. ‘Maggie my little darling’ he whispers, ‘please, please smile for Papa.’

*

The wee hours of the morning, in the dark of the parlor, sitting in a chair beside Maggie in the coffin, wearing the white dress, surrounded by the seven candles, Richard gets up, leans over close to her and kisses her on the lips. Without thinking, he goes over to Ellen curled up sleeping on a sofa; helpless wearing her plain black dress and with her bright-red hair in the tight bun; helpless, defenseless in the meaning of her plain black dress and bright-red hair in the tight bun oblivious of him nonexistent her great very admiration he could begin to strangle her here in the dark and then she would wake up become conscious of him afraid of him admire him for his power over her the reason why he feels a cold lucid lust to strangle her here in the dark would wake up with a cry of terror—even now It? And Ellen? Richard looks sadly upon her curled up sleeping on the sofa. Being extremely disoriented—and he the consummate actor and therefore always perfectly under control,

perfectly prepared with his role—he best go drink a cup of coffee. He leaves the parlor and goes down the main hallway toward the kitchen at the end.

There is sure to be some coffee left in the kettle, from which the housekeeper Charlotte, sent to bed a short while ago, offered him a cup several times. Now, perhaps, he can swallow a cup, or at least force a few drops down his throat. Richard enters the kitchen, flicks on the light and goes to a utility-table and the kettle on a warmer-plate. He pours himself a cup and goes and sits down at the table Charlotte and the two day-servants, the cook Milly and the handyman Arthur, take their noon meal. He tries to bring the cup to his mouth, but just cannot. Part of it is that he has not had a bite to eat since morning and his late breakfast in his hotel suite, before Carl—told him. But, then again, when he thinks about it, he had only just begun his late breakfast before Carl—told him.

He gets up from the table and goes to the refrigerator. He opens it and looks in it for something he might be able to eat, then sees something and suddenly slams it shut. What was that? In any case, whatever it was, he should kill himself immediately, this very instant—and suddenly bursts into a great rage and bounds about the kitchen, kicking and punching everything in his path, then slips and falls to the floor.

Who is that shouting his name? his name? but of course he is the actor Richard Burlington and the whole audience is shouting his name in great adoration and applauding his perfect performance no who is that right beside him *Sir please listen* imitating Carl's voice? and who *Richard dear* imitating Ellen's? and they are roaring with laughter who is roaring with laughter? the audience is roaring with laughter in the dark? or his fellow actors here with him on stage beneath the lights?—Richard, sprawled on the floor, looks up at a hand held out to him and a face lowered; Carl; his hair disheveled. There also is Ellen; wearing her plain black dress; her bright-red hair in the tight bun. But who is that there, that chubby older woman wearing a housecoat? Charlotte the housekeeper? But somebody is missing is there not somebody missing?

who is missing? of course where is where is where is it is late she must be sleeping yes sleeping but alone in the dark? *My little darling, anything to show Papa? Your doll's broken leg? The hole in the garden you made for the man from China to come out of? The hair-cut you gave Pussy?* she must be sleeping yes sleeping but alone in the dark? *Don't be afraid in the dark, because Papa is here. And he's a great actor, a great comedian* she must be sleeping yes sleeping but alone in the dark? *Maggie my little darling, don't be afraid, Papa is here to keep you safe*—Why is he on the floor? Richard looks up at a hand held out to him and a face lowered; Carl; his hair disheveled. There also is Ellen; wearing her plain black dress; her bright-red hair in the tight bun. But who is that there, that chubby older woman wearing a housecoat? Charlotte the housekeeper?

Richard, sprawled on the floor, lets Carl help him up. ‘Thank you my good fellow’ he says, trying to regain his bearings.

‘Richard, are you okay?’ asks Ellen in a hoarse weak voice very gently, almost caressingly.

‘What—no Ellen, I’m fine’ he answers, fairly ashamed. He takes a look around the kitchen at, to put it mildly, the mess he made. ‘I guess I sort of lost it.’

‘Why don’t you get some rest?’ she suggests in the hoarse weak voice. ‘Go to our room and lie down for a while?’

Her voice is hoarse and weak, he knows, from the fits of weeping she has experienced since morning, which he has not witnessed, but simply infers. Unfortunately, he can do nothing for her; unfortunately, he can do nothing for himself even, as only a few moments ago evinced by his running amok here in the kitchen—but what was it he saw in the refrigerator? ‘Yes Ellen, I should lie down for a while’ agrees Richard, trying in fact not to remember what he saw in the refrigerator. ‘But I’ll find a place in the parlor. It’s only right that we keep our little darling Maggie company’ and notices Charlotte is already cleaning up the mess he made.

‘Richard, I feel the same’ answers Ellen in the hoarse weak voice.

No, he can do nothing to alleviate her immeasurable pain. For he can do nothing, absolutely nothing to set right the cause of it. If only, if only the calamity were in a play, he could, would–no, reality, life is not a play and therefore, alas, he absolutely cannot go back to sometime before Maggie’s death and arrange things, to make certain that it would never happen.

Richard takes a look at Charlotte sweeping up the mess he made. But before he ran amok, what was it he saw in the refrigerator?

*

Charlotte has already put the kitchen to rights. Also all the things he broke are now, somehow or other, as if he had not broken them. In fact everything is exactly as it was before he ran amok. There is the kettle exactly where it was, on a warmer-plate on a utility-table. And there he pours himself a cup and goes and sits at the table Charlotte and the two day-servants, the cook Milly and the handyman Arthur, take their noon meal. And there he tries to bring the cup to his mouth, but just cannot. Part of it is that he has not had a bite to eat since morning and his late breakfast in his hotel suite, before Carl–told him. But, then again, when he thinks about it, he had only just begun his late breakfast before Carl–told him. And there he gets up from the table. And there he goes to the refrigerator. And there he reaches his hand to open the refrigerator–no! reaches his hand to open the refrigerator–no! reaches his hand to open the refrigerator–Richard wakes up with a violent start from drowsing on a sofa in the parlor.

For as long as he lives he will have this dream and every time, if he has anything to say about it, wake up before he opens the refrigerator and sees what he will never forget: a piece of Maggie’s birthday cake, wrapped in a little pink party-napkin, with “For My Dearest Papa” written on it in her child’s hand.

Richard will get up and go to the kitchen and, regardless of how difficult, how impossible, eat the piece of her birthday cake Maggie saved specially for him.

*

Richard steps out of the house onto the veranda; dawn just breaking, dawn just breaking and Maggie—no. He must divert his thoughts, must think of something else—such as the performance tonight. Though he told Carl, a short time before they were to depart for the airport yesterday, to inform Mister Fergus that Roland should move up to his own role, Roland, in all likelihood, did not feel that he could do it, having less than a day's notice, some mere hours to prepare himself for the role, though, during rehearsals, regularly exchanging roles with him. Therefore Fergus, being not only director of the play but manager of the company, decided to cancel, having been willing to sacrifice a whole night's box-office, but unwilling to take the risk of future low ones with a sub-par performance, knowing even the special circumstances, when publicized, would not help much. Richard must have Carl, when he gets up in a couple hours, ring Fergus and inform him that he will be unable to perform tonight as well.

No, of course he will be unable to perform tonight—or will he be able to perform tonight, tonight after the funeral? but funeral? funeral? but the play they are performing is a comedy not a tragedy nor even a drama when does the play begin? the play? the funeral? when does the funeral begin? what time is it now? is it not time to see his lines? will Carl not bring him the script? but the script? the script to see his child buried? if he could only learn his lines better perhaps he could get Maggie to smile to laugh to smile to laugh before they come and take her away but take her where? *Richard dear* so gently and to him?—Richard comes out of his, to say the least, disorientation and sees Ellen step out of the house onto the veranda in the light of dawn; wearing her

plain black dress and her bright-red hair in the tight bun; aged years from only yesterday evening.

‘Ellen, what can we do?’ he fairly pleads with a sob.

‘Richard dear’ she answers more or less steadily, trying, as since yesterday, faced by his moral collapse, to keep herself together for both of their benefits, ‘we must simply get through today—then each day as it comes.’

‘But Ellen—yes, you’re right’ he manages and lets out a long sigh. He takes a few moments to try to steady himself. ‘I think I’ll stay out here on the veranda a bit, try to clear my head.’

‘But please Richard’ she says hesitantly, cautiously, as if, he feels with a wave of shame, she fears that she might unnerve him, ‘don’t be too long’ and goes back into the house.

Richard looks at, to the left of the doorway a distance from it, the two fairly spaced shuttered parlor windows; the light of dawn falling upon them. With Ellen alone in the dark of the parlor watching over their little darling child, what business has he to be on the veranda in the light of dawn?

For that matter, with Maggie gone, gone forever, what business, what right has he, the utterly selfish, utterly greedy, utterly worthless—not even, no, not even able to revoke forever—what right even to live?

*

Lying on the divan in the study, despite the nonstop nightmare of the last two days, and the climax of it of the funeral in the morning, Richard feels relatively refreshed. But within his extremely strict everyday program, he always feels more or less refreshed after his afternoon rest—and he must feel refreshed for tonight’s performance, must be able to perform tonight to the utmost of his genius: he must, must create out of himself a cry of terror in the dark.

Richard gets up with sudden decision from the divan, goes to the door and opens it. Where is Carl? But this is not his dressing-room at the theater for him to be outside in the corridor guarding the door. He will immediately go find him and have him arrange the late flight back and a car at the airport, to take them directly to New Syracuse Theater after they land. Having barely any time, Richard will have to be quick with everything, particularly, when in his dressing-room, with his costume and makeup and getting everything exactly right with them.

He must admit, no, he cannot honestly deny that even in the morning, before the funeral, he had an idea that he would perform tonight, if only a more or less vague one; in the morning, before the funeral, when Carl asked him with extreme hesitancy—greatly undecided, obviously, whether he should make the query or not—what, if anything, should be said to Mr. Fergus concerning tonight's performance, what did Richard say? He only replied vaguely, ambiguously and let the topic drop.

In all likelihood, the economics being against cancelling again, they have got Roland ready, pumped him up and propped him up, to take his role for tonight's performance. It will not be a problem; Richard himself will simply ring Fergus and inform him that he will be there to perform tonight.

Before they rushed off to the airport yesterday, did Carl think to pack the script with his other things? Regardless, with or without seeing his lines for a final fine tuning, Richard will perform tonight to the utmost of his genius: he must, must create out of himself a cry of terror in the dark.

But what will Ellen say, say not merely concerning his leaving her to deal with her immeasurable grief and the complete devastation of her life alone, but concerning his very ability to ignore his own grief and the devastation of his own life? Or might she ask, at least herself, though having seen the shattering effects in him, has Maggie's death not really touched him? Is it, after all, not such a calamity to him?

Therefore might she not suspect that the shattering effects she has seen in him are but mere play-acting by him?

Whatever Ellen will say or think or feel, Richard will not explain himself to her. But in fact, even if he wanted, he could not explain himself to her, being unable to explain himself even to himself. Therefore, regrettably, he will leave with Ellen finding him, to say the least, reprehensible.

Anyway, whether this or that, with all the consequences and whatever the consequences, so be it. He walks briskly out of the study and down the hallway toward the staircase leading to the ground floor. He must immediately find Carl and tell him to arrange the flight and car and everything, then himself ring Fergus.

When he thinks about it, it would be much better if Carl in fact packed the script with his other things before they rushed off to the airport yesterday: he must, must create out of himself a cry of terror in the dark.

If only once before Richard dies: a cry of terror in the dark!

*

In his hotel suite, positively rested from a, thankfully, dreamless night's sleep of several hours, just finished with his morning shower, but, against the usual, unshaven—possessing a three-day growth of black beard, as his hair, with only a few hints of grey—sitting over his coffee in his bathrobe, Richard glances through the review in World Arts and Events:

“Despite the great personal misfortune, come to the public's attention only this morning...Richard Burlington was in top form...his best performance of the season—in fact his best ever in the role...the audience roared with laughter...”

Richard folds up the newspaper. ‘Carl’ he calls out. Carl appears in the doorway of the bedroom, where he was setting out his clothes for

the day. ‘Please my good fellow, as soon as you’re finished in there ring Mister Fergus and tell him I’d like to see him before rehearsal.’

‘Sir, I’m already finished with your clothes’ answers Carl. ‘I’ll phone Mister Fergus right away.’

‘And when you’ve done that please pack everything’ he tells him further. He sees a look of comprehension appear on Carl’s face. ‘Yes Carl, for me the season is finished. I’ll be spending time at home. Near, you know, my good fellow, you—you understand.’ He sees that Carl is about to say something consoling. ‘No’ he forestalls him, ‘I’ll manage, thank you.’

‘But Mister Burlington’ fairly swears Carl with a sincerity impossible to doubt, ‘you know you can always count on me’ and moves off to attend to things.

That good loyal Carl; the countless times he has got Richard through ordeals, particularly during the last five years, the years of the dominion of It.

What was it they said in the review? Richard unfolds World Arts and Events at the review again and takes a quicker glance through it, looking for the gist of it:

“Despite the...in top form...the audience roared with laughter...”

Exactly as he thought, the performance was a failure: not even a hint of a cry of terror in the dark.

But in fact since the moment Carl said “a terrible accident,” some time past noon Tuesday, the twenty-sixth of July, he has not cared at all about It, notwithstanding It, amidst the nightmare chaos, and his own nightmare disorientation, now and then forced itself insistently before him and was always there, lurking in the background. It, foolish and illusory It was, as far as he can understand, the main reason why he, yesterday evening, left Ellen alone, was able to leave Ellen alone, to perform, unbelievably, on the evening of their child’s funeral.

But what is It itself? As he always felt, some supreme truth of humanity? Or is It—but he cares not at all about It, though knowing that some time will be needed to rid himself of It completely.

But Richard must as soon as possible leave aside all such extraneous things once and for all. For he and Ellen must find it in themselves to survive, somehow or other, before the unbearable fact of Maggie's death.

Three

In the beginning, Richard spends every evening over Maggie's grave, arriving at the cemetery some minutes before the sun sets, the time of the summer performances at the outdoor New Syracuse Theater, and staying for a full two hours, more or less the length of the play. Yes, in the beginning, the first month, and after that less and less often and to a less and less degree, he finds himself falling back on his everyday thespian routine.

And though he returned on the day after the funeral, after his last performance the night before, somewhat calmed and controlled, he regularly reverts back to the extremely disoriented state born at the moment Carl told him that there had been a terrible accident, born of the very words "a terrible accident."

Alone over Maggie's grave in the evening—Ellen only wishing to go to the cemetery, because only being able to go, during the day—the regret now and again comes to him that he did not agree to put off the funeral at least a day. For if he had, he could have spent an extra day with Maggie and therefore, the crux of the matter, she would have been alone one less day. Not to mention, as Ellen wished, and why she urged him to agree to delay it till the next day, Maggie's grandparents, his mother- and father-in-law, could have attended the funeral, the countrywide transportation strike having ended at noon, only a few hours after it.

His mother- and father-in-law made the eight-hour train trip and arrived at the house late in the night of the funeral, hours after he departed in a hustle for the airport to make well in time, and in all-preparedness, the night's performance, to him, unbelievable now, after

some months of living constantly with the unbearable fact of Maggie's death.

Without his mother- and father-in-law he and Ellen both would not have got through the first days. But of course not only the first days were, to say the least, extremely difficult; after the first days, the first month or so, with all their shared tears and grief and rage, and his own sole regrets and self-criminations, there was a period, in some ways, more terrible, a period dominated by the cold lucid thought that Maggie's death is irrevocable.

Much of Richard's misery, and behind his regrets and self-criminations, the pain of them, is that he is unable to reverse the stream of events, unable to reverse the stream of very time from now back to the moment just before Maggie, playing on the veranda, heard the car coming from up the road. Or, rather, if he were in fact able, he would reverse time from now back to that moment and still further back to the moment of the night before her birthday Janice, still a stranger, knocked on his dressing-room door; if he were in fact able, if he were in fact not utterly impotent, he would reverse time back to that moment and not speak a word in response, but would keep silent and therefore, after he removed his makeup and changed out of his costume, go directly to his hotel and suite and get into bed, to be able to wake up and be on time for the early morning flight to The Coast the next day, Maggie's birthday.

But no, reality, life is not like a play, where, during rehearsal, upon erring, he needs merely to take it from the beginning again and again till he gets it right, gets it perfect, without errors; no, life is not like a play, where what only counts, has significance is the actual performance, on stage beneath the lights, before an audience in the dark. For in life, whenever and wherever, however and whatever, every single solitary moment counts, has significance: absolutely irrevocable significance and with endless consequences.

During the first couple months, Richard and Ellen are nearly continuously together; Maggie's death, from the moment of his return the day after his performance the night of the funeral—about which she breathed not a word to him—brings them together, physically extremely close together and emotionally more and more with the passing of time.

When alone on occasion, he is not too seldom pricked, excited, fairly lifted up with a sudden, he knows, utterly irrational hope and hastens into Maggie's room—perhaps? who knows?—but he never finds Maggie there, however hard he stares around in it and however long. On one occasion what he finds, other than the absence of Maggie, is Ellen, being there inspired by the same idea. But she has not done so again, knowing that as it is, with his great actor's imagination and sensibility, Richard is having a difficult enough time battling his tormenting demons, without her following his lead and therefore reinforcing and legitimizing any of his irrational, but understandable, behavior.

And when he hastens there in his irrational hope and enters, often enough breathless with his irrational hope, Richard always finds in Maggie's room not only her absence, the absence of her living, but everything as it was before she died, he and Ellen wishing, without speaking about it explicitly, to delude themselves purposely into some belief of her continued presence, if only in a sense.

At one point, some months after Maggie's death, Richard begins to pass certain hours of the day on the veranda. When there during the day, though trying to think absolutely nothing, he again and again thinks of the road, staring at it and any cars passing, be they few, being in fact days without even a single one, what with their villa some ten kilometers from town, on a quite secluded estate in the country. That only rarely do cars pass tortures him at times. For though indeed trying not to think about it, he wonders whether Maggie, on the morning after her birthday, when she rushed off the veranda, across the lawn and past the gates and out onto the road, thought that it might be a taxi bringing her Papa, if late, a day late, a day after her birthday. But then to stave

off the tormenting guilt for a moment, he reminds himself that, with rarely one, she used always to rush out to watch any car passing.

*

What difference does it make that he was not there for her birthday party? why should he have had to be there on the exact day of her birthday? in any case he spent a few days with her of his most precious days just a while back must have been before they began the summer performances here at the outdoor New Syracuse Theater early June he last saw her already over seven weeks ago? always endeavoring to see her at least once every month or so more frequent visits earlier in his career before It appeared should have found time to go to The Coast to see Maggie even before today her birthday but somehow or other did not could not would not no would not with so short of a time remaining to achieve what he wants to achieve needs to achieve must achieve a cry of terror in the dark *Sir, fifteen minutes* fifteen minutes? only fifteen minutes to prepare for the performance performance? tonight? no only fifteen minutes to catch the flight what? no flight? only tomorrow morning's flight at five-thirty? but today is her birthday tomorrow is too late it is the day after her birthday the day after her birthday is too late too late too late he wants to see her on her birthday must must must see her on her birthday what difference does it make? what difference? what difference?! must must must see her before the morning after her birthday before she playing on the veranda before he with the woman before Carl in his suite no! stay away! before Carl *Sir* no! shut up! before Carl *there's been* no! shut up! get away from me! before Carl *a terrible accident*—Richard forces himself awake in bed beside Ellen.

‘Dear are you okay?’ asks Ellen as gently as she can, knowing that he must have been having one of his nightmares.

‘How can I be?’ he demands in an abrupt aggressive tone blindly, without really seeing her, feeling that she is trying to extenuate the

blatant accusations of her bright-red hair in the tight bun, even now in bed, and one of her plain black dresses on the dress-rack in the corner. He suddenly notices how haggard and pale Ellen looks, not to mention the dark circles beneath her greenish eyes. ‘Sorry dear’ he apologizes. He gives a couple strokes to a long ungroomed black beard he has grown this past year. ‘Those nightmares again–again and always’ and turns onto his side, puts his arm about her and draws her close.

‘You were twisting and moaning horribly’ explains Ellen. ‘But I was afraid to wake you up. I didn’t want to make it worse, like the last time.’

‘Nothing can make it worse’ declares Richard categorically, ‘because nothing can change it.’

‘Today’ she brings forth their only thought with a quiver to her voice and draws his arm more firmly about her.

‘Today’ he echoes her. He thinks it over for a moment. ‘Today Maggie would’ve been–’

‘–Eight years old.’

‘But will never be eight years old. Our little darling will always be–’

‘–Seven years old.’ Ellen suddenly realizes that she has fallen under his thinking and mood. ‘Richard please no, let’s try only to think of when–everything was fine.’

But that is so much behind his deep sense of guilt, that he never appreciated even minimally that everything was fine. No, he will never forgive himself for not having appreciated Maggie even minimally.

Yes, alas, Richard, to say the least, took Maggie for granted and, worse yet, never gave her the love and attention she needed from him– anyway, exactly as he himself said to Ellen, nothing can make it worse, and what has happened must simply be accepted as irrevocable and endured. ‘Ellen, when do you want to go, before or after breakfast?’ he asks with gentle consideration.

‘Let’s have breakfast and then go’ she answers placidly, comforted by his attention.

Richard thinks of how he will return alone to the cemetery a short time before the sun sets, as he did daily the first month after Maggie died, but which with Ellen's persistent help, begun after she followed him one evening and caught him in the act over Maggie's grave, caught him insanely ranting and gesticulating and capering, he ceased to do altogether. Regardless, though there is the risk of falling again into the crazed state, he feels the need, today being Maggie's very birthday.

No, it is not and will never be her eighth birthday, but is and will always be her seventh birthday: today, the twenty-fifth of July, will be Maggie's seventh birthday forever.

*

A short time before sunset, Richard makes his way silently through the house. He does not want Ellen to hear him. For if she does, if she catches him, she will try to keep him here, will argue with him against going again to the cemetery. She fears, he knows, that he might revert to how he was the first month or so, brought overwhelmingly before her the evening she followed him to the cemetery and caught him in the act over Maggie's grave, in his role with all its insane behavior.

But his role? His role?! Rather, during that month, alone over Maggie's grave in the evening, Richard was expressing, revealing, living his inmost and most real thoughts, inmost and most real emotions and inmost and most real desires, with all the accompanying frustrating regrets and tormenting guilt.

But Ellen need not fear for him. For he will only go this evening and will not again—at least not till the evening of Maggie's birthday next year.

And what about poor Ellen herself? She has, he knows with great shame, carried most of the terrible burden this first year and therefore suffered the devastating emotional and physical consequences. It is high time that he left aside all his own, to say the least, difficulties, or at least

hid them from her and pretended that all is more or less well with him, and began to care for her.

Richard walks out of the house onto the veranda and goes across it to the steps leading down to the lawn, in line with the gates on the far side opening on the road.

‘Richard’ calls out Ellen softly. He turns round and sees her sitting in a lounge-chair at the far end of the veranda.

He goes over to her. ‘I simply must’ he asserts in response to her unvoiced thought.

‘Dear, do sit here with me’ she enjoins him with a small smile.

He notices how Ellen has thinned this last year even more than she had before the calamity, the time of the five years she tried to survive beneath the tyranny of his absolute solipsism. He sits down with reluctance in a lounge-chair beside her.

‘Richard’ she says somewhat pensively, ‘we should be together on the evening of Maggie’s birthday.’

‘Yes Ellen, we should’ he agrees, wishing in earnest to soothe her pain of the moment. ‘But I was—...’ He cannot tell her. For she would believe, with much cause, that he was letting himself revert to the crazed state of the first month and therefore worry over him even more.

At least, in fact not at all a small matter, but the contrary, Maggie’s death has brought them together again, though indeed with most of the burden upon Ellen.

But yes, he will from now on try to get out of himself and look more and more after her; he will try, at the least, to balance out things by trying to take upon himself more and more of the burden. Also from now on he will try to make up to her for the last years, for the loss of the years he was plagued by the desire to create out of himself, on stage beneath the lights, a cry of terror in the dark of the audience. Richard can hardly believe that he desired such a thing, much less that he was an utter slave to the desire. ‘Yes Ellen’ he reiterates her utterance of some moments ago whole-heartedly, ‘we should be together on the evening

of Maggie's birthday' and leans over to her in the lounge-chair beside him and kisses her on the lips.

Some time passes, both of them sitting there taken up with their own thoughts.

'Richard' says Ellen with some hesitation.

'Dear?' wonders Richard what she is going to go into.

'May I ask what you have in your hand?'

What he has in his hand? Of course in his hand, but he forgot. He should have been more careful. 'Only a few tokens.'

'May I see?'

'Please Ellen, I—...' and gets up abruptly and walks to the edge of the veranda facing the lawn.

'Richard?'

Yes, he should have been more careful, but expected her to be in the garden in the rear of the house, as usual at this time, the approach of sunset and evening.

'Richard dear, if it's anything I can help you with...'

But already knowing his crimes, Ellen might as well know this also, only one more piece of evidence of his guilt—but beyond all doubt: clinching, finalizing, damning. He turns from the lawn and goes up to her sitting in the lounge-chair. He opens his hand to her and unfolds the little pink party-napkin he has kept since the night of the vigil.

'Candles?' she wonders with uneasiness what may be the meaning of them.

'Seven of them naturally' spits out Richard cuttingly, fairly the voice and tone he uses in castigating and condemning himself. 'Because Maggie will always be seven years old. No, Maggie will never grow older.' He sees that she is unable to say anything, unable to respond to the truth of what he said and, more difficult, to respond to the truth, to deny the very reality of the seven candles themselves. 'This evening only—' he adds quite against his will '—a special performance.'

‘No dear, you sit here by me and forget about your special performance’ manages Ellen with a fairly humorous smile, though unsettled by him and the seven candles. He sits with reluctance again in the lounge-chair beside her. ‘Richard’ she changes the subject abruptly, wishing to infuse a degree of normalcy, but also feeling that it might be a good time to bring up an idea she has now and then had the last week or two, ‘you might want to begin thinking about returning.’

‘What—how could I?’ he answers, taken completely unawares. He looks off abstracted for a moment. ‘I can’t come close to imagining myself—only for a few laughs.’

‘But isn’t that something, a few laughs?’ she asks with a poignant passion in her voice he used often to hear before he ruined everything. ‘A few laughs for people whose lives are frightful or simply sad?’

‘Ellen, I don’t doubt you’re right, but I simply couldn’t’ he sticks to telling her the truth. He again looks off abstracted for a moment. ‘Anyway, if I ever return I won’t change my old bent of not wanting to do tragedy or even drama—though the reason is now completely different from what it used to be.

‘No, reality, life is as it is too distressful, painful, too filled with misfortune, as we...

‘Yes, if I ever return I will as before do only comedy, if only for a few laughs—in fact, as you say, not such a trivial thing.’ Fortunately, her reaching out to him, to understand him, and, shamefully for him, simply to succor him, went in another direction, away from the seven candles, the seven birthday candles he wanted to adorn Maggie’s grave with and light, amidst the fresh flowers they strew on it in the morning, when they went together after breakfast. Also it is a good thing that she did not look closely at the little pink party-napkin. No, Richard cannot show it to Ellen just yet; perhaps, some other time; perhaps, one day.

Though still barely able even to think about it, able only to think about it with the most excruciating effort and pain, as the night he kept vigil over Maggie in the parlor—which he has only recently been able to

enter again—and not to mention when, afterward, he returned to the kitchen to confront it body and soul, no, Richard will never forget “For My Dearest Papa.” ‘Anyway, Ellen dear, the worst has happened’ he says, trying to speak with a resigned tone in his wish, though to speak the truth, not to burden her with his own, to say the least, difficulties. ‘No, nothing worse can happen.’

‘No, nothing worse can happen’ she echoes him.

‘No more of my craziness—forgive me’ he blurts out in his wish to begin this very instant taking upon himself the burden. He will, perhaps, show to Ellen “For My Dearest Papa” even tonight, or if not tonight, then sometime tomorrow, yes, the dreaded day after Maggie’s birthday, the twenty-sixth of July.

‘But there’s tomorrow’ she voices his thought somewhat anxiously.

‘As I was just thinking’ he admits. ‘But again there’s nothing we can do, no defense, only...’ and scoots himself closer to her beside him in the lounge-chair and wraps his arm cozily about her shoulders. How thin she has become!

‘No, there’s nothing we can do, no defense, only...’ she echoes him and pecks him on the cheek above his long ungroomed black beard.

‘And nothing worse can happen’ he repeats in a, he hopes, reassuring tone. Definitely, sometime tomorrow, if not in fact tonight, Richard will show to Ellen “For My Dearest Papa” written on the little pink party-napkin in Maggie’s child’s hand. He kisses her warmly on the lips and draws her closer. Yes, how thin she has become!

From now on, from this very moment on the veranda, here with her beside him, of the early evening of Maggie’s birthday, Richard will, he vows, look more after Ellen and therefore take upon himself more of the burden, the burden they will of course have upon themselves for the rest of their lives. Also, at the same time, he will try to make up to her for the last years, the years he was obsessed with the idea, the indeed monomaniacal idea of a cry of terror in the dark.

His life during those years was, he now knows, ridiculous beyond measure, not too mention simply base, particularly when compared to the terrifying significance of Maggie's death. No, nothing, absolutely nothing worse can ever happen. Richard again kisses Ellen warmly on the lips. Soothed by his attention, she smiles at him a small tender smile, then lays her head on his shoulder.

Someday, being the consummate actor, in fact Richard the Great himself, he will succeed in making Ellen smile for him one of her beautiful wide smiles of the time of their courtship and the first years of their marriage.

But, then again, Richard the Great? For if he were, and not merely on a stage beneath the lights, before an audience in the dark, performing a play to the directions and lines of a script, but in the chaos which is very life, why could he not on the night of the vigil, in the dark of the parlor...?

Four

One day, some months after the first anniversary of Maggie's death, Richard realizes that he has kept his vow to take upon himself the burden, or at least a good share of it, made unconditionally on the evening before it, that of Maggie's birthday, the twenty-fifth of July, sitting with Ellen on the veranda; one day, he notices that Ellen has put on some weight and, a more telling sign, ceased to coddle him—which she indeed did the first year, he must admit with great shame—obviously, possessing more confidence in him now.

During this time, to try to get their minds off, at least for a few hours, the unbearable thought of Maggie's death, they now and then make an effort to do things and go places, but only seldom carry out any idea they come up with.

Recently, on his inspiration, they, somehow or other, made it to the capital, to see the sights they have seen countless times and, chiefly behind the idea, to lose themselves in the carefree and excited crowds of tourists. They had planned to stay three days, but after they ventured out on the morning of their arrival, trying at least to occupy themselves with the sights and sounds and movement and rush, both found it impossible and, after a quick lunch out, returned to their hotel room and passed the remainder of the day there. They departed the next morning. For they absolutely needed to get back to the house, where their little darling lived the years of her life—alas, too brief, too brief life—and to be near her “there,” where she will be some months less than two years more, till the exhumation.

Richard and Ellen began only recently to refer to the cemetery and her grave as “there,” not so much to lessen for themselves the heart-rending reality and significance of them, but to be to Maggie herself less cruel,

less harsh, less unyielding and, the crux of the matter, less false: their little darling Maggie, and all the memories the thought of her brings to mind, only “cemetery” and “grave?” Nothing indeed could be further from the truth.

Richard’s need to be near the house is centered on Maggie’s room. He spends a good amount of time in it looking at her things, her little clothes and shoes, her toys and dolls and, occasionally particularly difficult, but needful, her books and notebooks from her first and only year of school. He began recently also to handle her things, fairly fondling them and, though less often, planting kisses on them, afterward always replacing everything exactly as it was. And though now never suddenly hopeful that she might be in it when he enters, he often catches himself in his imagination, indeed that of, he feels grateful at these times, a great actor, filling in the empty spaces of her room with images of her and words she might have spoken, gestures might have made and games and other amusements played.

Richard and Ellen have a strong need to be alone at the house. Now a few months before the second anniversary of Maggie’s death, they have still not received visitors, much less guests for stays, as wont in the earlier years of their marriage, before he became totally immersed in his acting and totally, to put it mildly, neglectful of everything else. The past year, only Ellen’s parents came and stayed with them, doing so several times, usually for a week or two. Their first visit was in August, about a month after the first anniversary of Maggie’s death. They wanted to be there for it, but Ellen’s father was having worse than usual problems with his heart, nothing serious, only something which has for years called for attention now and then, though, unfortunately, more often since the death of his grandchild a few months short of two years ago.

The horrible days of the second anniversary of Maggie’s death become imminent. One day, a week before the dreaded day, Ellen’s parents arrive; luckily, her father is feeling fine, or at least as fine as an

elderly man can in general and for a visit to his daughter and son-in-law for such a reason. First the twenty-fifth of July, her birthday arrives—Richard this time only thinking to himself the irrefutable truth that Maggie will be seven years old forever—then the dreaded day, the day after her birthday. Having got some grip on himself the last couple months, at least externally and in his behavior with others, Richard is able to focus his energies on Ellen and his mother- and father-in-law, who have a particularly hard time of it, being the first time they have experienced the days of Maggie's death directly.

After the second anniversary, and his mother- and father-in-law depart, the latter ravaged and quite prostrate and having only wanted to get home and rest, Richard takes possession of the study as his private study, as in earlier times, and begins now and then to leaf through books and even to glance over scripts, not with anything in mind, but merely to occupy himself and to pretend that he is doing something relatively constructive.

The second year passed, into the first months of the third year, when looking at himself and his behavior in his everyday relations and concerns, Richard feels that he has regained much of his former self-command, which of course used to be of the highest degree on stage, from the moment of curtain-up till the moment of curtain-down. Now he is, as opposed to then, not at all forcefully extroverted, forcefully focused and expanded outward and buoyant, exuberant, but restrained, inner, contained and, beneath all, always touched with a tender sadness.

The winter months drawing near, Richard begins to spend more time in Maggie's room and Ellen, not having done so since the last months of the first year, begins to spend time in it again, both wanting to be near her things and all they recall these months, before they remove everything and make her room into an extra guest-room, which they will do after the exhumation. Though they have still not decided on the exact date, having some nine months more, the exhumation will be a

short time after the third anniversary of Maggie's death, the twenty-sixth of July, one day in the first week of August.

*

One day in the last week of November, in the study, sitting in an armchair, Richard hears a knock at the door; that was not Ellen's knock; nor the housekeeper Charlotte's. Who can it be? A couple more knocks; what—Carl? Carl?! Suddenly Richard springs up and rushes to the door and opens it. 'Carl my fellow!' he exclaims in a burst of welcome and shakes his hand heartily.

'Mister Burlington, I wasn't sure—...' blurts out Carl with some embarrassment and looks aside in the hallway.

Richard leans out of the doorway and sees Ellen with a hesitant smile on her face. 'Ellen?' he wonders what she and Carl have contrived together.

'Richard sorry' she says somewhat sheepishly and steps up to him in the doorway.

He waves off her concern as unnecessary. 'But what have you and Carl...?' he asks with a note of curiosity.

'A couple days ago Mister Fergus phoned' explains Ellen, 'wanting urgently, so he said, to speak with you. As I know you don't—well, I thought it best for Carl to come and speak for him.'

'Dear, you did the right thing' he lets her know. He turns to Carl and gives him a couple friendly slaps on the back. 'I'm extremely glad to see old Carl here.'

'I'll leave you two alone then' says Ellen. 'Is there anything I can have Charlotte make?' She turns to Carl. 'Sandwiches and coffee, Carl?'

'No thank you Madame Burlington' declines Carl politely, 'I had—'

'—Everything will be here shortly' she puts a stop to his silliness, then

turns round and goes down the hallway toward the staircase leading to the ground floor.

Richard shows Carl to an armchair opposite the one he was sitting in, then they both take their seats. ‘Carl, if you could forgive me I’d be very grateful’ apologizes Richard without preliminaries. ‘It was only that I—’

‘—Please sir, there’s no need’ cuts in Carl to prevent him from going on, extremely uncomfortable with the apology. He takes a moment to order his thoughts. ‘Sir, as Madame Burlington said’ he addresses the reason for his visit, ‘at her request I came in Mister Fergus’ stead.’

‘Yes?’

‘He was wondering...’

‘Carl, feel free to say what you want to say.’

‘Mister Fergus wants to know whether you might be interested in playing—’

‘—Playing?!’ exclaims Richard, completely surprised.

‘Yes sir, playing’ affirms Carl. ‘It’s a series of charity performances during the holidays, at the Imperial. All in all there’ll be twenty, the first on December tenth and the last on the thirty-first, New Year’s Eve.’

‘Charity, you say?’

‘Yes Mister Burlington.’

‘But why come to me so late? Even if I were interested it wouldn’t allow me much time to prepare myself.’

‘Sir pardon me, but Mister Fergus has tried to get hold of you from early last month.’

When he thinks about it, Ellen has, during the last month or so, on a couple occasions told him that Fergus rang and wished to speak with him, but each time he, in all likelihood, looked at her with a look mirroring his feeling of aversion to that whole life and, the crux of the matter, at times outright loathing of the actor Richard Burlington. It is the reason why he has, the last two years, neglected and not fulfilled his

obligations to Carl himself, who deserved much better treatment. ‘But even if I wished to, being for charity, I’m very rusty to say the least’ declares Richard modestly. ‘No, I don’t think I could manage, particularly with so short of a time to prepare.’

‘Sir, part of it indeed is it’s for charity’ responds Carl. ‘And simply with the holidays, your name and it would be your first appearance, your big return after...’

‘I see’ says Richard with a small chuckle, despite the allusion to Maggie’s death. ‘The economics of it?’

‘And, Mister Burlington sorry, it’s not the leading role’ says Carl with some embarrassment. ‘But’ he adds, wishing to make it sound better, ‘I’m told the role is—’

‘—That’s how far I’ve fallen, is it?’ cuts in Richard with another small chuckle. Suddenly the thought of Ellen comes to him and how it would please her and, perhaps, be an inspiration for her, on her own part, to let down her bright-red hair from the tight bun or even to leave off wearing her plain black dresses. ‘My good fellow, when is rehearsal?’

‘Rehearsal is noon tomorrow’ answers Carl with a sudden grin. ‘We’ll have to depart early in the morning.’

‘You brought the script?’ asks Richard with an ironic smile, knowing that Carl, beyond a doubt, would not have come without it.

‘Yes sir’ answers Carl with enthusiasm. ‘Let me go get it out of my bag in the guest-room’ and gets up from the armchair. Richard follows his lead.

‘Carl my good fellow, let me tell you again how wonderful it is to see you after all this time’ he says and gives him a few quick fond pats on the back. ‘May I ask how Marianne is doing?’

‘Marianne’s doing fine, thanks’ answers Carl. ‘We’ve absolutely decided next year, before the holidays, we’ll be married.’

‘That’s very good to hear’ says Richard with genuine feeling. ‘Now let’s see’ he returns with a self-jesting tone to the subject of his playing ‘what we can do with a secondary role, okay?’

‘I’ll go get the script right away’ says Carl cheerily, happy that things are returning to normal, then turns round and leaves the study.

But only a secondary role? He, formerly Richard the Great himself, in a secondary role? He will see about that! Richard chuckles to himself, then suddenly bursts into a good hearty laugh. What? Seems to be, as far as he can recall, quite the first since the words “a terrible accident,” the words “a terrible accident” he will remember for as long as he lives, yes, regardless of whether or not fate will in the future be so kind to grant opportunities for a bit of laughter, only a bit of laughter.

*

A week after his return from the charity performances at the Imperial during the holidays, on the first Sunday of the new year, in the parlor, the windows with the curtains drawn apart letting in the morning sunshine, sitting beside one another over their coffee in their housecoats, Richard and Ellen hear the whir of the postman’s motorbike in the road in front of the house. She checks him with a hand and gets up. ‘No dear, you stay here and quickly brace yourself with some more coffee’ she teases him.

‘Gosh, I’d better, because you never know with those critics’ he responds with jocular humor.

‘I’ll be back in a second’ she says. ‘I want to get there before Charlotte’ and hurries off and out of the parlor.

All joking aside, Richard has not felt this anxious, and this type of anxiousness, since he was an unknown actor in his first relatively substantial role, when he used to wait in his lodgings for the morning newspapers to come out and, when they did, right off the trucks, would go down and be the first customer at the newsstand.

Ellen comes back into the parlor with a handful of letters and several newspapers. She hands him World Arts and Events, tosses the rest of

the stuff on the table and resumes her seat beside him. ‘Well, aren’t you going to look?’ she asks, seeing him only sitting there.

‘Sure, right away’ he answers almost timidly. He picks up his cup and finishes off the coffee, indeed bracing himself almost seriously. But he really should not be worried. For during the time of the twenty charity performances, the dailies were kind to him. But, then again, they were only kind to him because of the nostalgia of his return and the whole stir of his having overcome the “personal misfortune”—however designated, as if he ever would overcome it—with, to all intents and purposes, nothing on how he managed with his role. Part of it of course was that his role was only secondary, though important and, he feels, with much in it.

‘Richard, you remind me of how you were the first years’ says Ellen and pecks him on the cheek just above his long ungroomed black beard. ‘Do you remember?’

‘Of course dear’ responds Richard with a wry smile. ‘When you had to read the reviews first. Then you had to tell me about them in a roundabout way, before you gradually, with me on teeth and nails, got to the gist of it, whether good or bad. And even after all the precautions, before I saw for myself, you had to read me out selected bits.’

‘Let’s see what we can do now, okay?’ she suggests for fun.

‘I think we’d better’ he agrees with a chuckle. ‘But only take a look and read me out bits—that is, if you think you should at all’ and smiles another wry smile, then hands her World Arts and Events.

Ellen unfolds the newspaper and finds the page with the review. She looks quickly through it for key words. ‘Mm.’

‘Mm? What does that mean?’

‘Don’t be so impatient.’ She looks more closely through the review.

‘Well, is the review good or bad?’ wonders Richard, genuinely nervous now.

‘Key words?’ asks Ellen with an almost grave expression he cannot decipher.

‘Yes, key words’ answers Richard, indeed anxious in earnest.

‘Dear Richard...’ says Ellen with poignant emotion and tears, happy tears, he is positive, to his wonder, come to her greenish eyes. ‘My good husband’ she avows with a deep solemn reverence which quite humbles him, overwhelms him.

Some time passes, he sitting there stunned, without knowing exactly why, and she reading thoroughly the review.

‘Let’s see’ says Richard humbly ‘what they’ve got to say about the old ham.’ Ellen gives him World Arts and Events open at the review. He glances through it:

“A magical New Year’s Eve at the Imperial...Burlington created in the theater, among both spectators and fellow players alike, a marvelous fond merriment...Burlington, in this last performance, carried it without a flaw...the children were as wide-eyed as on Christmas morning...if only his beard were white...jolly old Santa himself...the very adults laughed like children...the greatest, though most modest, gift...to say the least, an inspired performance by Richard Burlington...”

Richard folds up the newspaper. ‘Ellen my wife, we didn’t do too bad, did we?’ he says with extreme modesty.

‘No Richard my husband, we didn’t’ she assures him and kisses him on the mouth through his long ungroomed black beard, then smiles at him, to his outright joy, her beautiful wide smile of the early times nearly to perfection.

Five

During the period immediately after the review in World Arts and Events, through the rest of January and into the first days of February, Richard speaks with Fergus over the phone nearly every day. Fergus wants him take the lead role again in the play he last played in before Maggie's death, to be again performed for the summer season at the outdoor New Syracuse Theater. One reason is, Richard knows, that Fergus is confident about the economics, what with the nostalgia of it, his return to the same play and theater and whatnot after a nearly three-year hiatus. But it also has much to do with his very sturdy playing at the Imperial during the holidays, particularly the last night, New Year's Eve, as highly praised in World Arts and Events.

Against Ellen's wishes, having in fact suggested that he begin to think of returning to the stage months back, near the close of the second year, Richard is extremely hesitant about accepting Fergus' offer. His worry, one reason against it, is that, when into July with the third anniversary of Maggie's death on the horizon, he will not be able to perform at all, much less well; when into July with the third anniversary of Maggie's death on the horizon, he fears that he will become, at best, emotionally unnerved and physically exhausted, particularly with having turned fifty last year and, though still fairly trim and taut, his toughness not what it used to be. Also there is the practical matter that he will have to absent himself from the performances during the days of the anniversary.

And still another reason against accepting Fergus' offer is that this year, which indeed will close the third year, there is the exhumation and the great strain on him and Ellen he expects; they will have trouble enough, he knows, simply to get through more or less in one piece and therefore will need all their energies body and soul. Also, here likewise,

there is the practical matter that he will have to absent himself from the performances during the days of it, at that, only a week or so after he will have had to do so from those during the days of the third anniversary of Maggie's death.

Anyway, no, even leaving aside the practical matter that he will have to absent himself from at least a week of performances, Richard is fairly set against the whole idea of playing during the up-coming summer season.

On one of the first days in March, Fergus phones and tells Richard that he must have from him his decision. Richard asks him for a day more. The same evening, he and Ellen discuss the matter exhaustively, she urging him to accept.

But no, Richard decides against it, being indeed the last months before the close of the third year of Maggie's death, with its changes of the packing away of all her things, the making of her room into an extra guest-room and, the new frightening event, the exhumation. He calls Fergus and tells him that he will have to decline the offer, but would be willing to participate in something during the next winter season, if only in a secondary role. He goes to Ellen and tells her that he declined and is surprised to see her fairly sigh with relief. But of course, exactly as he needs her, she needs him—once again, he berates himself, he has fallen into his old egotistical habit of seeing everything with him as the all-important center of everything—needs him during these last months before the third anniversary of Maggie's death and, again the new terrible event they will have to deal with together, the exhumation.

During these months, from after the charity performances in December, Richard and Ellen are always planning, finally, to get out and go places and see people, but never really manage. It is mostly that they still feel the simple need to be near Maggie's room. Now, well into March, with the end of the, they both feel, sacred trust-keeping of it as it was with her in life approaching, they in fact spend more and more time in it with each passing day.

But during these months, they do take daily walks together, apart from those to the cemetery. They now and then look in on friends and acquaintances in the other villas in the area, merely to say hello and chat some minutes about current local news and suchlike. They regularly go down to the sea, a relaxed twenty-minute or so stroll from the house, and pass a couple hours wandering along the shore and in the rocks. And during these months, they once a week, usually on Saturday, the day of the big market, make the long hike into town, just over twenty kilometers there and back.

Well into April, their everyday behavior with one another, a forerunner of which appeared on the Sunday morning they attacked the review in World Arts and Events together, is now fairly playful and to a degree even light-hearted, almost as if they were endeavoring to recapture the spirit of their courtship and the early years of their marriage. Regardless, still Richard sticks to sporting his long ungroomed black beard and Ellen to wearing only her plain black dresses—though for some time now, to his gladness, letting her bright-red hair down and loose—which, without speaking about it explicitly, each will leave off doing only after the exhumation.

One day in the last week of April, they receive a phone-call from Ellen's mother, who tells them that her father has suffered a heart-attack, his condition appearing critical. The next day, Ellen makes the eight-hour train trip there alone. After a couple days, when things begin to look as if he were at his last, Richard joins her. One day passes, another day passes, another and another. Then the doctor informs them that there is no longer any immediate danger and that now Ellen's father must simply recuperate as best as he can.

A few weeks later, in late May, Ellen's father, without suffering another heart-attack, begins to weaken drastically. Richard and Ellen make the eight-hour train trip there together. He stays for a week, then returns to the house. For they both feel that they must, bound by the

sacred trust-keeping, be near Maggie's room. A few days later, Ellen's father's heart beats its last. Richard goes back for the funeral.

Richard and Ellen are to stay on through June, to support and comfort her mother. But with Ellen, to say the least, distressed by the death of her father, and just now with the horrible days around the corner, Richard is the chief support and comfort to his mother-in-law, as indeed to Ellen herself. In addition, within these weeks, he several times makes the eight-hour train trip back to the house, to ensure that all is well with Maggie's room, always remaining for only the day of his arrival, travelling on the midnight train and therefore arriving in the morning, then the next day returning to Ellen and his mother-in-law.

Richard and Ellen make plans with her mother for her to come stay with them during the upcoming days of the third anniversary of Maggie's death—she will be arriving on the twenty-third, three days before it—then both return to the house. They do not continue to take their daily walks, nor to look in to say hello and chat a bit with friends and acquaintances in the other villas in the area, nor to go down to the sea and the shore and rocks, nor to make their weekly long hike into town, nor, least of all, their fairly playful and to a degree light-hearted behavior with one another, or their attempt at it, but keep near to Maggie's room and go “there” at least twice a day.

The days of the third anniversary arrive. But then, each supporting the other and in the distraction of needing to give much attention to her mother, Richard and Ellen find that the dreaded day after Maggie's birthday has suddenly become yesterday and see with some astonishment that they, though battered and pained body and soul, have once again come through more or less in one piece.

But then the exhumation with the decision of when to do it suddenly confronts them. They decide to do it in a week's time.

Undeceived by his relatively controlled performance during the days just passed—and though necessary in order to get them through, what else was it but a performance, acting?—feeling a strong need for

something he cannot articulate, Richard has an inspiration to call Carl, though knowing that it is selfish to be willing to burden him. It is not so much his loyalty and devotion—indeed possessing infinite stores of them in Ellen—how she has ever forgiven him and when forgiven him for the five years before Maggie’s death he will never know—not so much his loyalty and devotion, but more his general presence, still young and hopeful and completely caught up in his courtship and the thought of his and Marianne’s future married life together. Also Carl knows how to read his moods and therefore when to say a word and to extend a hand in support, as proved again and again through those years he was tormented by the desire to create out of himself, on stage beneath the lights, a cry of terror in the dark of the audience.

Richard rings Carl and says to him that, if he is not busy with anything—finding that he is now, during the summer months, simply spending time with Marianne, at least the hours she is off work—he would be, to say the least, very grateful, indeed greatly indebted to him if he could be a good fellow and come be with him during the next week or so, referring explicitly to the exhumation. Carl tells him that he will be on the morning flight to The Coast tomorrow.

*

The evening of the day before the exhumation, arranged for tomorrow morning with Dr. Sylvester, the representative of the Health Ministry in the area, Richard and Ellen, just from Maggie’s room, step out of the house onto the veranda. ‘We won’t be getting much sleep tonight’ says Ellen.

‘No, we won’t’ agrees Richard, knowing that they will be, being the last day of the sacred trust-keeping of it, in and out of her room through the night, as through the day after they, arriving there at dawn, got back from the cemetery around noon. ‘Without Carl I—...’ he falters, thinking of what he has to confront tomorrow morning. ‘I don’t know—...’

‘Richard my husband’ she fairly pleads, ‘again please forgive me, but I–’

‘–No Ellen my wife’ he stops her from going on and gives her a reassuring hug. Ellen should not feel as if she were failing him, what with her unbelievable courage with all it involved these three years, such indeed as carrying him through–regardless, he is glad that he will have Carl with him at the exhumation tomorrow morning. ‘Do you know where Carl is?’

‘The last I saw of him he was on the phone with Marianne’ she says in a lighter tone with a flit of a smile. Richard gives a small chuckle. ‘Shall we, Richard my husband?’ she asks and offers him her hand.

‘Let’s, Ellen my wife’ he answers and takes her hand in his.

Hand in hand, Richard and Ellen go back into the house, returning to Maggie’s room.

*

A warm sunshiny morning, in the cemetery, some small distance from Maggie’s grave, though wishing not to and trying not to, Richard listens to the steady repetitive rhythm of the shovels drive into the ground and the clumps of soil and sod fall on it again and again. He strokes his long ungroomed black beard; very damp; he is sweating a good deal waiting for the two gravediggers to finish.

Suddenly he hears with a start steel strike on wood, then with a more violent start a mass thud on the ground. He must now confront it, confront it alone, no, with no costume and no makeup, no scenery and no props and, above all, no script. But thank goodness, thank very grace that Ellen is not here.

Carl steps up behind him and places a tentative hand on his shoulder. ‘Sir, it’s time’ he says with supreme reserve.

‘Right away’ manages Richard with a catch in his breath. He walks up to the hole in the ground; a pile of soil and sod on each side; Maggie’s

coffin in front. He turns to Dr. Sylvester. ‘Doctor, is there any formal procedure with this?’ he asks as steadily as he can.

‘No Mister Burlington’ answers Dr. Sylvester, ‘only as we already spoke of and as we are here present.’

Richard glances at the faces of the two gravediggers leaning on their shovels, then looks at Carl; utterly helpless, though trying to look firm, dependable. Why did Richard, stupid selfish man he is, involve the poor fellow? Carl should not be here, but on some park bench, lazing away the time till Marianne breaks for lunch and, afterward, back on the park bench till she lets off for the day.

Anyway, Richard must simply get it over with. He steps right up to Maggie’s coffin. He notices that Carl and Dr. Sylvester are standing on either side of him. He turns to the two gravediggers leaning on their shovels. ‘Please my men’ he gives the order with a quiver to his voice and suddenly an incredible tension, mostly latent till now, inundates him. He looks down with great effort at Maggie’s coffin and hears a crack of wood what? bones in dust the gravediggers stumble away what? a groan who groaned? Dr. Sylvester averts his face what? where is Carl? tatters of a white dress a skull what? the mouth of the skull gaping wide!—suddenly Richard thrusts his clenched fists upward with great force, then collapses abruptly onto Maggie’s remains in her coffin.

